DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 543 CS 504 573

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TITLE Being Clear about "Competence."
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (69th, Washington, DC, November 10-13, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Communication Skills; *Competence; *Concept Formation; *Definitions; Educational Assessment; *Evaluation Criteria; Interpersonal Competence; Research Needs; Research Problems; *Semantics; Specifications; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

There are at least four distinct uses of the term "competence" in speech communication: (1) to refer to some set of standards used in evaluating aspects of communication processes, (2) to refer to some set of objects to be evaluated, (3) to refer to a method for evaluating aspects of communication against some standard, and (4) to refer to a process, attribute, or mechanism that is offered as an explanation of some evaluated feature of communication. Regardless of its use, it is important to keep in mind that there is no single, widely accepted use for the term and that anyone can, in fact, use the term any way he or she pleases. In addition, the different uses of the word competence involve references to different things, and very often the application of the term to something depends more on the way a researcher has set the parameters in a research program than on anything else. When competence is used to refer to some standards of evaluation for communication, it is important to recognize that just as there is no correct use for the term "competence," there is no single correct set of standards for assessing communication. The best solution would be to stop using the term and to develop a differentiated vocabulary that reflects distinctions in its use. (HOD)

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ED248543

BEING CLEAR ABOUT COMPETENCE

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A discussion paper prepared for the Speech Communication Association seminar on Communication Competence. Washington, D.C., November, 1983.

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BEING CLEAR ABOUT "COMPETENCE"

I want to begin my discussion by calling attention to an obvious point: the use of terms is governed by convention; the relationship between symbolic vehicles and their meanings is arbitrary. There is nothing intrinsic to the word chair that requires us to use it in referring to chairs--we could as easily call tables chairs and chairs tables.

Similarly, there is nothing intrinsic to the term comptetence that requires us to use it in referring to any particular aspect of communication processes or communicators. That is, there is no intrinsically correct use for this term.

Moreover, we can, if we choose, use a term in a variety of different ways, to mean several different things. In fact, the terms chair and competence are both made to work overtime in just this way (chair can mean both an object to sit on and the person who runs a meeting; competence has at least four distinct uses, which I discuss below).

However, the way people use, think about, and react to chair is different in a number of important ways from the way they use, think about, and react to competence. (1) When people use chair in one of its conventional senses, they know which use they are making of it. When communication theorists use competence they generally fail to recognize which use they are making of it. (2) People do not generally argue about which use of chair is correct; but theorists frequently argue about which use of competence is correct. (3) When people discuss types of chairs, they usually restrict their discussion to one use of chair. They do not try to construct typologies which are used to classify simultaneously all the things chair can be used to refer to. People are pretty sensible about chairs; they probably

would not claim that chairs come in one of four types: autocratic, democratic, hard, and soft. By contrast, some communication theorists have attempted to construct typologies of all the things competence can be used to refer to. 4) When people attempt to clarify the meaning of a term like chair (as, for example, in a dictionary entry), they usually attempt to specify what all the conventional uses of the term are, being careful to discuss all the important distinctions involved in uses of the term. When communication theorists recognize the conceptual confusion surrounding the term competence and set out to remedy the confusion, they generally do one of two things: they try to find the "least common denominator" present in all uses of the term (the functional equivalent of saying "in all uses of the word chair, chair refers to an object whose regular task is to face a bunch of asses and support them") or they propose some new use of the term, presumably because by doing so there will be at least one use that is precise and clear (the functional equivalent of saying, "there's a lot of confusion in our use of chair, so instead let's use it to mean that object which, in the context of some social situation, is perceived by those around it as being appropriate for sitting upon").

Now I do not know why the word competence provokes these bizarre responses from communication theorists, but I do believe the discussions which employ the word competence would be clearer if it were treated as an ordinary word. And I think the situation would be even more dramatically improved if the single term competence could be replaced by a differentiated vocabulary in which important distinctions in use would be mirrored in distinctions in the lexicon.

This paper has a very limited aim. In it I want to call attention to some important distinctions in uses of competence and argue for the importance of maintaining these distinctions in analyses of communication.

Uses of Competence

In this section I display some different uses to which the term competence can be put. I argue that there are at least four distinct, conventionally appropriate uses of the term current in our disciplinary community: (1) to refer to some set of standards used in evaluating aspects of communication processes; (2) to refer to some set of objects to be evaluated; (3) to refer to a method for evaluating aspects of communication against some standard; and (4) to refer to a process, attribute, or mechanism which is offered as an explanation of some evaluated feature of communication. The easiest way to display these four different uses for competence is to show how the term might be applied in a concrete analysis of communication. For purposes of simplicity, I have constructed a hypothetical example.

Suppose I am interested in investigating persuasive communication skills. I center on an attribute of persuasive messages that I think is important to persuasion: the degree to which a message reflects a focus on the needs and wants of the persuadee rather than the needs and wants of the persuader. I call this attribute "receiver-focus."

Suppose further that I discover that the single most important determinant of whether any given message produced in a concrete instance of persuasion manifests or lacks a receiver focus is a characteristic of the message producer: some people produce receiver-focussed messages and some do not. And so I posit the existence of a communicator characteristic, "the ability to produce receiver-focussed messages," which I use to explain receiver focus in messages.

Thus far what I have done is to identify an attribute of messages and offer an explanation of the presence of that attribute in messages. But my attention shifts: I become interested in explaining how the attribute "ability to produce receiver-focussed messages" comes to be characteristic of a communicator. And I discover that the likelihood that a person will display the attribute "ability to produce receiver-focussed messages" is strongly related to another communicator characteristic, "perspective-taking ability."

Just to make things interesting, suppose further that I find that messages that display a receiver-focus are more persuasive than those that do not and that people who have been observed producing receiver-focussed messages sometimes fail to do so.

I proceed to write up this line of research. In doing so, I might use the term competence in any of a number of ways in describing my findings depending on whether I use it to label (1) a set of standards for evaluating communication or communicators (and which of the various sets of standards I employed I want to so label), (2) the set of objects to which I think my standards of evaluation should be applied, (3) the method by which the set of standards I employ is to be applied in assessing relevant features of communication/communicators; or (4) the explanation I give to the occurrence of some feature of communication/communicators.

So, to put it concretely, I might say any of the following things about my findings:

(1) Rhetorical competence (effectiveness at persuasion) is a function of the receiver-focus of messages.

(2) Rhetorical competence (receiver focus in messages) is a function of the ability to produce receiver-focussed persuasive strategies.

(3) Rhetorical competence is the range of messages or repertoire of strategies a person is capable of producing.

(4) Rhetorical competence is the greatest degree of receiver-focus a person is capable of producing in a message.

(5) Persuasive effectiveness is a function of rhetorical competence (receiver focus in messages).

(6) A persuader's effectiveness is a function of rhetorical competence (the persuader's ability to produce receiver-focussed messages).

(7) Persuasive effectiveness is a function of fundamental communication competence (perspective taking ability).

(8) Receiver-focussed message production is a function of rhetorical competence (the ability to produce receiver-focussed messages).

(9) Receiver-focussed message production is a function of rhetorical competence (the ability to engage in perspective-taking).

(10) The ability to produce receiver-focussed messages is a function of competence (perspective-taking ability).

In examples (1) and (2) competence is used as a label for the standard of evaluation used in assessing communication. In (3) competence is used to refer to the set of objects to which standards are to be applied (not the messages the person actually produces, but the range within which messages fall). In (4) competence is used to refer to the manner in which a standard is to be applied to a set of objects; in this case, by focussing on detection of the highest level of performance in relation to a standard and not just assessing any instance of performance. In (5) through (10) competence is used to refer to attributes or processes which are offered as explanations of

features of communication. Notice that in (5) through (10), what gets labelled as competence depends on whatever cause-effect sequence has been isolated in a long and complex causal chain.

One point of clarification: notice that while one might employ the term competence in referring to virtually any standard of evaluation (the chief constraint on this use of competence appears to be that the nominated standard be evaluative), one would be disinclined to use or accept the label competence in reference to just any set of objects, just any method of applying criteria to objects, or just any attribute or mechanism that is proposed to explain a feature of communication. Because of this, the following examples do sound bizarre:

(11) Rhetorical competence is the set of messages a person has produced in trying to persuade.

(12) Rhetorical competence is the average effect a person achieves when he or she engages in persuasion.

(13) Gender is strongly related to the ability to produce receiver-focussed communication; therefore gender is one important component of communicative competence.

(14) Persuasive effectiveness is strongly dependent on the social context in which persuasion occurs; therefore, social context is one important component of rhetorical competence.

Conceptions of the kinds of sets of objects and the kinds of methods for applying standards of evaluation to objects the term competence can appropriately be applied to have obviously been influenced by Chomsky's use of the term in drawing his distinction between competence and performance. In drawing this distinction, he used competence to refer both to the set of objects to be evaluated (the set of all possible sentences in a natural

language, as distinguished from the set of sentences people actually produce) and to a method for applying the criterion of grammaticality to sentences (only to those sentences which are generated in the absence of "performance limitations"). As a consequence, in using competence to refer to sets of objects, we are prone to apply the term to abstractly defined sets of things rather than those which have actually been observed in some transaction--to the possible rather than the actual. Example 11 is odd because competence is used to refer to a finite set of actual messages.

Similarly, in using competence to refer to methods of applying criteria, we are prone to apply the term to methods which are designed to produce assessments that are in some sense purified of contaminating factors or reflect optimum performance of a system. Example 12 is odd because competence is used to refer to a method of applying the criterion (effectiveness) that plainly does not produce assessments of optimum performance or of performance under optimum circumstances.

Examples (13) and (14) both involve the use of competence to refer to things that explain features of communication; these examples are odd because we are prone to use competence to label certain kinds of explanatory mechanisms (mostly the knowledge, skill, or ability possessed by a communicator) rather than others (e.g., personality characteristics, age, gender, attributes of the social environment).

So while I think that uses for the term competence fall into the four general categories I named (perhaps among others), I suspect that within each category of use there are some constraints on the application of competence that I can only formulate vaguely. In short, the distinctions I have drawn are gross, and almost could be certainly be formulated more specifically.

The Importance of a Reflective Use of Competence

Having drawn the distinction among four different uses of competence, I want to emphasize the importance of maintaining these distinctions.

First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that there is no single, widely accepted use for the term and anyone can, in fact, use the term any way they please. The appropriate reaction to anyone's use of competence is, therefore, "what does he/she mean to refer to?" and not "that view of competence is right/wrong."

Second, the different uses of competence I have pointed to involve references to different things, and very often the application of the term to something depends more on the way a researcher has set the parameters on a research program than anything else (as in my examples in which competence is used to refer to explanatory mechanisms; given a different window on the process of communication, "social perspective-taking" might look like an attribute of "performance" to be explained by positing some "competence" like increased information processing capability). As a consequence, efforts to construct an "integrative" view of competence by surveying and summing up all the different things people have labelled as competence are doomed to be incoherent.

Third, when competence is used to refer to some standard of evaluation for communication, it is important to recognize that just as there is no correct use for the term competence, there is no single correct set of standards to employ in assessing communication. The appropriate set of standards to use depends on at least two things: the theory of communication one has and the motivation one has in seeking to evaluate communication processes. One might therefore argue that given a particular view of communication, some proposed criterion or standard of evaluation cannot be

usefully employed; or that given a particular interest in assessment (for example, predicting how well teachers will perform in a classroom) some particular criterion is either quite valuable or not very useful. Unfortunately, when the word competence is currently used in a discussion of this sort, the issues seldom get formulated this clearly or even in a way in which they can be usefully discussed. Instead, the issue gets reduced to a definitional dispute. The commonest resolution to this kind of argument, because there is no other way to reach agreement in a dispute over definitions, is to construct the union of the two sets of standards, producing a set of criteria that is theoretically incoherent and useful for no purpose.

Finally, we should stop proliferating new uses for competence. Competence gets quite enough use already. Humpty Dumpty to the contrary, paying words overtime is neither feasible nor effectual as a response to conceptual confusion. When the conceptual load being carried by a term grows too heavy for it to bear, the best solution is stop using it and develop a differentiated vocabulary that reflects distinctions in use.